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ABSTRACT

Since adults are socializing agents integral to home and school settings, they should have accurate views of children's feelings. Adults' (N=96) predictions were compared to the predictions kindergarten children (N=32) made about the children's affective responses to eight different categories of experiences. The children's predictions, reported in a previous study, provided the baseline against which adult predictions were compared. Adults and children agreed on reactions to success (happiness), nurturance (happiness), failure (sadness), and justified punishment (sadness). They disagreed on responses to: (1) being the target of peer aggression with children predicting anger more than adults; (2) unjustified punishment with children expressing sadness and adults feeling angry; (3) dishonesty that is not discovered with children expressing happiness and adults expressing fear. Adults' level of depression and frequency of contact with children were unrelated to their agreement with children. Where disagreements existed, adults cited more conceptually complicated affects, such as fear or anger, while children selected the simpler affects of sadness and happiness. (NRB)

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ADULTS' UNDERSTANDING OF CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTIONS

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Abstract

How well do adults understand children? Adults and children were presented with vignettes describing a type of experience (e.g., success) and asked what would be their own (children) or a preschool child's (adults) emotional reaction. Adults and children agreed on reactions to success (happiness), nurturance (happiness), failure (sadness), and justified punishment (sadness). They disagreed on responses to being the target of aggression (children predicting anger more than adults), unjustified punishment (children: sadness; adults: anger), dishonesty that is discovered (children: anger; adults: fear), and dishonesty that is not discovered (children: happiness; adults: fear). Adults' level of depression and frequency of contact with children were unrelated to their agreement with children. Results are discussed within a framework of social cognition, focusing upon the nature and development of implicit theories about affective behavior.

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The publication of an insightful review in 1975 of social cognition marked the "arrival" of this area concerned with "the child's intuitive or logical representation of others, that is, how he characterizes others and makes inferences about their covert, inner psychological experiences" (Shantz, 1975, p. 1). This area emerged from the traditional work in person perception by social psychologists such as Kelly (1955) and Heider (1958) and from the extension of research in cognitive development and logical problem solving to social phenomena. Almost without exception, person perception research was concerned with adults' perceptions of other adults. The application of this model to children resulted in studies of children's understanding of and predictions about other children (e.g., Borke, 1971; 1973).

Little attention has been paid to adults' predictions of children's behavior or feelings, or vice versa. One exception is the recent paper by Miller, White, and Delgado (1980) which examined the accuracy of adult parents' and non-parents' predictions of the ages at which various cognitive achievements are exhibited, their variability, and other aspects of cognitive development. Both parents and nonparents predicted quite accurately the temporal sequence of acquisition of different abilities, but there was considerable inaccuracy in the adults' beliefs about the ages at which object permanence is achieved and the appearances of some formal-operational and late concrete-operational concepts. The present investigation is also concerned with adults' predictions about children's cognitive appraisal of the world. However, the focus here is not on cognitive achievements but on various social experiences and children's affective responses to them.

There are many reasons such phenomena are of interest. Affect is immutably intertwined with parent-child relations, and adults' expectancies regarding children's emotional reactions surely guide their behavior towards children before, during, and after children's encounter with an emotion-producing experience. In addition, it is of interest to compare the predictions of adults who are parents and those who are not. This permits an examination of the role social interaction might play in the conceptions or "implicit models" adults develop regarding children's affective responding. Contrasting adults' and children's predictions of emotional reactions also allows the elucidation of possible developmental differences in adults' and children's attention to situational and personal cues in predicting another's behavior, complementing a number of recent nondevelopmental studies dealing with the relative importance of the person and the situation (e.g., Schuster, Murrell, & Cook, 1980; Hoffman, Mischel, & Johnson, Note 1).

There are further reasons that adults' predictions about children's behavior are important to understand. Since adults are integral in home and school settings as socializing agents, it is important for them to have accurate views of children's feelings and their understanding of their own feelings if understanding and communication are to be fostered. Since previous studies have demonstrated the limitations of parents' memory for their own children's development (Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970) and the sometimes untoward effects of teachers' beliefs about the behavior of students in their classrooms (Shaeffer, Note 2), it is equally important to understand what adults think children will do as well as what they actually do.

Other recent research in cognition has explored possible interrelationships between personality and cognition. One particular area that has received attention is the role of affect in adults' memory for events (e.g., Isen, Shalker, Clark, & Karp, 1978; Teasdale & Fogarty, 1979), or their ability to solve problems (Velten, 1968). Provocative questions have been raised about how an individual's affective state might influence memory processes and the actual content retrieved. Ongoing affect could thus influence adults' predictions about children's behavior. Consequently, the adult's level of depression at the time they were asked to predict children's reactions was assessed by means of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961).

In the present study adults' predictions were compared to the predictions children made about their affective responses to eight different categories of experiences: experiencing success, experiencing failure, being nurtured, being dishonest but not getting caught, being dishonest and getting caught, being punished justifiably, being punished unjustifiably, and being the target of peer aggression. Kindergarten, third- and sixth-grade children's predictions regarding their affective responses to the above situations were reported in Barden, Zelko, Duncan, and Masters (in press), and these predictions provide the baseline against which the adults' predictions are compared here. The present report is concerned only with the adults' predictions for kindergarten children; subsequent reports will present data currently being collected on their predictions for third- and sixth-grade children.

Method

Subjects. Subjects were ninety-six young adults drawn from introductory psychology classes at a major state university. Information about the respondent's sex, marital status, education, occupation, and experience with children was obtained. Nearly all (>90%) were unmarried, childless, and had had little contact with children. The thirty-two kindergarten children whose responses provided the baseline for comparison were from the same metropolitan area and were unrelated to the adult respondents.

Measures. Predictions regarding emotional responses to various classes of experience were assessed in both children and adults through vignettes describing examples of experiences in each class. There were forty vignettes, five for each of the eight classes of experience described above. An example from the class of vignettes describing Failure is the following: "Richard lost a race with his friend while running home from school. How did Richard feel?" (Mad? OK? Happy? Sad? or Scared? Why?) Among adults, sad affect was detected through the use of the Beck Depression Inventory. The order in which the measures were administered to adults was counterbalanced. There were two forms for the affective response questionnaire containing different randomizations of the order for the vignettes. Half of the subjects received one form, half the other.

Procedure. Both the BDI and the questionnaire required written responses by the adult subjects. A cover letter to the questionnaire explained that the study was concerned with how four- to five-year-old children of the same sex as the respondent would feel as a result of the situations described. The subject was allowed to choose among the same five affects--happy, sad, scared, mad, or OK (neutral)--that the

children had themselves chosen among (see Barden et al., in press, for more details). The adults were then asked to explain in a sentence why the child would feel the way the adult had indicated.

Results

Data Analysis

The primary data were adults' and childrens' predictions of children's affective responses in the eight categories of situations presented. The number of times that a subject chose each possible affect (happy, sad, etc.) within a given vignette type (e.g., nurturance) was calculated, and this figure served as the basic unit of data. The data were then subjected to repeated-measures analyses of variance comparing categories of the vignettes, with follow-up comparisons using the Duncan multiple-range tests. Independent variables examined in the adult sample included sex of subject, Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) score, and frequency of contact with preschoolers. Comparisons were made between adults' predictions of and preschool children's own views about their affective reactions. The preschool data were drawn from the Barden et al., (in press) sample and analyses of those data are presented in detail in that report.

Consensuses among Adults in the Prediction of Children's Emotional Reactions

Consistent with earlier findings concerning children's consensuses regarding their own emotional reactions (Barden et al., in press), adults attained a high level of agreement in their predictions of preschoolers' affective reactions, $F(1,94)=221.6$ $p < .001$. Furthermore, there was a greater magnitude of consensus in adults' predictions for some categories

of experience than for others. For example, the predicted reactions to experiences of success and nurturance were almost universally happy, while more complicated situations such as unjustified punishment and dishonesty-not caught showed a lesser degree of focused consensus (See table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Subject Variables

A comparison of adult groups with high and low BDI scores did not indicate any differences in their responses to the vignettes. Furthermore, in an extreme group analysis using cutpoints of 5 and below = Low and 11 and above = High, no differences were found in either the use of affects across or between categories. Similarly, neither adults' reported frequency of contact with preschoolers nor the sex of the adult had any effect on their affective predictions for children.

Agreement between the Consensuses of Adults and Children

Comparing the adults' and the children's predictions, there was significant agreement for half of the content categories but significant disagreement in four out of eight content categories, $F(1,62)=8.80$, $p < .01$. The vignette classes of failure, success, justified punishment, and nurturance elicited essentially identical consensuses from adults and preschoolers, but there was disagreement regarding reactions predicted by adults and by children for experiences of dishonesty, caught or not, unjustified punishment and aggression.

For unjustified punishment situations, adults predicted that children would be more likely to be angry than sad, and that their most probable

reactions would be one of these two. Children anticipated a sad response, but with a broader scatter of responses among the remaining alternatives.

Although the hierarchy of emotional responses to being the target of aggression was the same in both age groups, children predicted feelings of anger (a secondary choice) almost twice as often as did adults.

In situations where the protagonist was dishonest and caught, adults predicted fear as the likely response, with sadness as a secondary consensus. Children themselves, however, predicted sad and angry responses at about equal frequency, with a lesser consensus on fear.

Striking differences pertained for the category of being dishonest and not caught. Preschoolers predicted their primary response to be happy, with alternative emotions being predicted less often but with about equal frequency. Adults on the other hand, expected children to be frightened most consistently, to show no affective reaction (Just OK) to a lesser extent, and formed a tertiary, though identifiable, consensus for a happy response.

Discussion

From the present findings comparisons can be made between the implicit models that adults and preschoolers hold about the latter group's affective behavior. The results revealed adult-child agreement on half of the proposed situations and disagreement on the rest when subjects were asked to predict a preschooler's likely affective responses. Consensuses of predicted affect corresponded for reactions to success, failure, and nurturance experiences, and punishment that is justified. Unjustified punishment, being dishonest and caught, being dishonest and not caught, and being the

target of aggression, on the other hand, yielded divergent predictions by the adult and preschool groups.

A close look at the most frequently predicted affects for these classes of experience suggests a possible distinction between those eliciting agreement and disagreement. When there was disagreement, adults invariably had cited affects that are more conceptually complicated, such as anger or fear, whereas (as in all categories) preschoolers chose from among the 'simpler' affects of sadness and happiness. This observation parallels one from previous work by Borke (1971; 1973) in which developmental trends in the use of different affects were identified. In an earlier interview study (Barden et al., in press) it was found that the affects of happiness and fear were used differentially by children of various ages. Preschoolers cited happy affect more frequently and fear less often than either third- or sixth-graders. The complexity of various affects and their use at different ages are issues meriting further investigation as integrated aspects of cognitive and personality development.

Convergent and divergent adult-child predictions may also have their origins in the complexity of the situations depicted in the vignettes. For example, unjustified punishment, as a "qualified" experience (in being unjustified), would seem to require more comprehensive, judgmental consideration than would 'unqualified' experiences such as success or nurturance. The category being the target of aggression, elicited disagreement not in the <u>focus</u> of consensus, but in the <u>level</u> of consensus obtained, suggesting that adults and children have different degrees of familiarity with this experience. It may be proposed, then, that adult-child disagreements

are most likely to characterize situations that are either more complex, less familiar to the child, or which involve the use of a more developmentally-sophisticated affective repertoire.

Another possible source of discrepant predictions is that of the experience base of the predictor. Kelly (1955) was among the first to propose a view of individuals as information-gathering 'scientists' who seek to understand and predict their world. A more current version of the same approach views man as an 'implicit theorist' who bases his belief systems on past experience (Wegner & Vallacher, 1977). An individual child's or adult's implicit understanding of affective reactions will surely be influenced by his or her own past experience and there are likely to be developmentally changing commonalities in such experience--whether personal or vicarious. Thus, differential familiarity with various categories of experience as a factor contributing to the implicit affective theories of adults and children may have produced disagreement. For example, adults may base their preschool predictions on an impoverished pool of observations of four and five year-olds, and hence be inaccurate. Such a limited information base might force the adult to instead make use of a more culturally-based (and quite possibly inaccurate) 'trait' view of what children ought to do or feel in certain situations.

It is the case, however, that the present results do not support this hypothesis about the source of disagreement between adults and children. In the comparison of adult groups reporting different levels

of familiarity with preschoolers, no differences were found in response patterns by the present investigators. Miller, White, & Delgado (1980) obtained a similar result in their study of parent and nonparent predictions of cognitive development. It appears, then, that adults' level of experience is not a crucial factor in determining their implicit theories of children's behavior, a somewhat counterintuitive finding. It should be noted that in the current investigation the range and distribution of reported experience with children was not broad. Therefore, the exclusive use of college undergraduates in our sample places constraints on the interpretation of this finding.

Still another possible source for disagreements between adults and children would be limitations in children's experience. Children themselves may have a limited familiarity with their own reactions to some categories of experience and thus may be inaccurate at predicting their own behavior. Since an individual's implicit theory of his own behavior (his self-theory) appears to develop in much the same manner as his theories of others behavior (Wegner & Vallacher, 1977), self-prediction would be equally susceptible to a lack of experiential data. Selman (1976) has proposed a model of the age-linked progression of self- and social-perspectives, positing an undeveloped and inaccurate self-theory in early childhood. Unfortunately, the topic of self-theory accuracy (in predicting actual behavior) is largely unexplored. Shantz (1975), for example, has pointed out that little research has actually attempted to relate social cognition to in-vivo social behavior.

One further potential source for discrepant predictions by adults and children relates to the cognitive apparatus that they bring into the prediction situations. One widely-studied process pertinent to this possibility is that of cognitive perspective-taking. The ability to assume one's own and others' perspectives accurately is a factor limiting predictive accuracy for adults and children alike. Typically, the emphasis has been on the cognitive limitations of the child in his ability to shift perspective (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). Recent work has considered numerous aspects of cognitive perspective-taking (e.g., Kurdek, 1977), and generally supports the notion of age-related advances in role-taking ability.

Another cognitive source of discrepancy lies in possible differences in the allocation of attention to aspects of situational information. These differences need not be quantitative in nature but may instead reflect more qualitative differences in the direction of attention within a given context, but in either case would have a significant impact on the formation of implicit theories of behavior (Shantz, 1975). With the numerous sources of information available to the individual in a social context, selective attention to different aspects of the environment might result in totally discrepant data bases for adults and children. Recent work has shown that different aspects of a situation (e.g., person, setting, and interactive components) may contribute significantly different amounts of variance to the prediction of behavior (Schuster, Murrell, & Cook, 1980; Hoffman, Mischel, & Johnson, Note 1). A comparison of differential attention to personal and situational cues used in the formation of implicit theories of behavior would logically follow within this framework. Hartup, Brady, and Newcomb (Note 3) recently took a developmental perspective on the use

of simultaneous sources of social information, focusing on the processing requirements of social cognition and behavior. Hopefully, similar work in the future will continue this approach to attentional components of social cognition and extend our understanding of attentional processes in the formation of implicit theories of affect and of behavior in general.

One rather specific issue addressed in the current investigation was that of the influence of the adult predictors' affective states on their predictions. In our adult sample, however, previous clinical and experimental hypotheses linking affect with cognitive distortion were not upheld (e.g., Hollon & Beck, 1979; Isen, Shalker, Clark, & Karp, 1978), since even extreme groups analysis based on BDI scores did not yield any differences in the responses to the vignettes presented. One reason for this may lie in the nature of the cognitive judgments (predictions) required. Garber and Hollon (1980) found that although mood states did relate to cognitive distortions (in the prediction of future success on a task), this was only true for predictions about <u>oneself</u>. Predictions made about others were unaffected by the presence or absence of sad mood. The present failure to identify effects of mood states on predictions, then, may stem from the fact that adults predicted children and not themselves. It is also possible that the range of negative affect present in a normal adult population is limited and it may be that extreme or intense affective states do influence expectancies about others. The question of mood influences on social cognition needs to be addressed more thoroughly in the context of predictions about self and others. For example, children's and adults' expectancies regarding their own affective reactions may change as a function of this current mood.

The degree to which adults can accurately appraise children's affective responses (and vice versa) and the processes by which such approval is accomplished are as yet only poorly understood. The finding that adults misunderstand children's belief systems (accurate or otherwise) about emotional responses to being dishonest and not caught, for example, has implications about the effectiveness of fear-induction socialization practices to discourage dishonesty as well as about their continued use by adults who believe in an emotional response that may not actually exist. Such discrepancies between adults' and children's implicit theories of one another's behavior and emotions are worthy of sustained attention on several levels. Time would be well spent in the systematic investigation of environmental and cognitive determinants of implicit theories of affect and behavior. In her review of the social cognition literature, Shantz (1975) emphasized the need to focus upon process aspects of social cognition. Future work should be directed at such process components in the development of perspective-taking ability and the direction of attention as well as the acquisition of knowledge in general. In addition, subject factors such as sex, age, and affective state must continue to be explored to clarify their roles in enhancing or from the detracting accuracy of understanding of oneself and others. Finally, the link between social cognition and social behavior should be elucidated in an effort to evaluate the accuracy of individuals' implicit personality theories as applied to themselves and to others.

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Table 1

Mean Consensuses of Childrens' Predicted Affective Responses: Adults and Children

Category		Order of Mean Affect Consensus Scores[a]				
		I (Highest)	II	III	IV	V (Lowest)
FAILURE:	Adults	S (2.03)	OK(1.59)	A (.97)	Sc(.28)	H (.03)
	Children	S (2.22)	OK(.88)	A (.84)	H (.63)	Sc(.44)
SUCCESS:	Adults	H (4.59)	OK(.19)	S (.13)	Sc(.09)	A (0)
	Children	H (3.91)	OK(.56)	Sc(.28)	A (.13)	S (.09)
JUSTIFIED PUNISHMENT:	Adults	S (3.0)	A (1.56)	Sc(.66)	OK(.13)	H (0)
	Children	S (2.06)	A (1.47)	Sc(.71)	H (.41)	OK(.28)
UNJUSTIFIED PUNISHMENT:	Adults	A (2.5)	S (1.88)	Sc(.47)	H (0)	OK(0)
	Children	S (2.18)	A (1.13)	Sc(.63)	OK(.56)	H (.44)
AGGRESSION:	Adults	S (2.72)	A (1.13)	Sc(.78)	OK(.16)	H (.09)
	Children	S (2.03)	A (2.03)	Sc(.31)	OK(.31)	H (.28)
DISHONESTY-CAUGHT:	Adults	Sc(3.18)	S (1.16)	A (.41)	OK(.18)	H (0)
	Children	S (1.72)	A (1.31)	Sc(.94)	OK(.50)	H (.44)
DISHONESTY-NOT CAUGHT:	Adults	Sc(1.81)	OK(1.16)	H (1.06)	S (.78)	A (.16)
	Children	H (2.06)	S (.81)	A (.72)	OK(.72)	Sc(.59)
NURTURANCE:	Adults	H (4.28)	OK(.59)	Sc(.06)	S (.03)	A (.03)
	Children	H (4.59)	OK(.25)	A (.09)	Sc(.03)	S (0)

[a]Affect consensuses are listed from left to right in order of decreasing magnitude. The mean consensus is given in parentheses, maximum = 5, minimum = 0.

H = Happy, S = Sad, A = Angry, Sc = Scared, OK = Just OK.